Statement of Bob Vaught
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Before
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Subcommittee on Federal Workforce and Agency Organization
Concerning
Wildland Fire
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INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today. I am Bob Vaught, Supervisor of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, 6.3 million acres of magnificent mountainous terrain in the state of Nevada. About 649,000 acres of the Forest are located in California on the east side of the Sierra Nevada range. I'm responsible for the oversight and management of the natural resources on the National Forest including working with local people and communities. I supervise 424 employees of whom 137 work fulltime and seasonally in fire management. Many of our non-fire employees are in occupations such as wildlife biology, forestry, engineering, and hydrology, and while not full time firefighters, have qualifications for supervisory, tactical or support roles during a wildfire when the need arises. In addition, these employees are essential to planning and carrying out fire activities. Many factors and people are involved in fire and fuels management, preparedness, suppression, rehabilitation and restoration. Today, as requested, I will discuss the current fire season, our methods of wildland fire management, and the duties of the many people involved in fire management.

Of the three factors that most influence wildland fire behavior – weather, topography, and fuel - land managers can effectively influence only fuel. For much of the twentieth century, wildland fires were generally thought to be bad for the environment. As a consequence, fires were suppressed as soon as possible. Over time and across large areas, fire-adapted ecosystems changed as the amount and structure of shrubs and trees increased.

The build up of vegetation, coupled with other factors such as long-term drought and the development of homes and communities next to wildlands, has led to increasing concerns about both the health of our forests and rangelands and the risks to communities near these lands.

Understanding and meeting these challenges requires unprecedented levels of interagency cooperation among Federal agencies and with state, tribal and local governments.

First, I'd like to say a few words about this year's fire season in Nevada. Early rains led to heavy growth of grasses and other herbaceous fuels at lower elevations. Most of western Nevada rangelands remain at high risk for wildfire. Eastern and southern Nevada will likely have near normal fire danger for the rest of the season due to occasional heavy rainfall. Forested areas will continue to see near normal fire danger conditions in August.

PREPAREDNESS

While we prepare local resources to be ready for wildfire suppression, we also have the ability to draw on national assets if we need them in the event of a wildfire. The Predictive Services office at the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) and units located in each geographic area provide an ongoing outlook for the fire season by monitoring weather, climate and fuel conditions and reporting the changing conditions. The reports increase in frequency as the fire season progresses. This information supports local, geographic and national decisions about resource allocation based on anticipated fire starts, fire spread and severity.

In the event of a fire start, the closest available firefighting resource responds regardless of agency. Usually this is the agency with management jurisdiction and protection responsibility for the location of the fire, such as a national forest or national park. However, interagency agreements allow for response by the closest firefighting entity.

In initial fire attacks, agencies use a variety of techniques, including firefighting crews, engine crews, and a mixture of helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. In recent years, we have succeeded in controlling more than 98 percent of fires through initial attack. If a fire continues to grow and local resources are inadequate, our fire managers request additional help.

Critical firefighting needs are coordinated through the National Interagency Coordination Center, located at the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) in Boise, Idaho. If fire-fighting assets are strained as a result of multiple simultaneous large fires, resources are prioritized and allocated by the National Multi-Agency Coordinating group at NIFC. The National Multi-Agency Coordinating group consists of the national fire directors of all the Federal firefighting agencies and state representatives. These efforts ensure firefighting assets are appropriately positioned based on the most up-to-date information.

Firefighting resources include:
Fulltime professional fire program leaders;
Permanent firefighters
Temporary firefighters hired by location;
Federal agency personnel in other occupations qualified and mobilized to perform incident management duties in addition to their normal responsibilities, often called the “militia";
Tribal, State, and local personnel (including volunteer fire departments) through mutual aid agreements;
Agency-owned equipment;
Contract equipment, aircraft, and crews; and
Firefighting personnel from other countries; and the
United States military.

In 2005, our status for firefighting resources is comparable to 2004. Nationally, more than 18,000 firefighters are available, including permanent and seasonal Federal and State employees, crews from Tribal and local governments, contract crews, and emergency and temporary hires. If, locally, we experience severe fire risk, we stage or deploy firefighters, equipment, and teams as needed. Personnel, equipment, aircraft, vehicles, and supplies are dispatched and tracked through the nationally integrated system. Supplemental personnel, equipment, and aircraft are

pre-positioned in specific locations when we determine that there is an increased risk of fire starts.

AVIATION

Nationally, to date, the 2005 aviation plan includes 16 heavy airtankers, 14 large helitankers and more than 260 other helicopters. Through cooperative agreements with State and interagency partners, there are two exclusive use CL-215 airtankers, 26 Exclusive Use Single Engine Airtankers (SEATS), and approximately 70 Call- When-Needed SEATS. Two Call-When-Needed CL-215s are available. Eight military C-130 aircraft equipped with the Modular Airborne Firefighting System (MAFFS) are also available. Equipment is positioned as needed depending on weather and fuel conditions. Four of these MAFFS units were activated and are operating out of Boise, Idaho.

In 2004, the Forest Service terminated the contracts for heavy airtankers due to the National Transportation Safety Board recommendations about the airworthiness of the aircraft. Some of these heavy airtankers have been returned to service after an acceptable operational service life was determined. The primary role of heavy airtankers is to deliver a large amount of retardant rapidly, in the initial attack of a wildfire to support ground firefighters. Heavy airtankers are only one of the many tools that we use to suppress wildland fires. We increased our fleet of other firefighting aircraft to assist ground firefighters, particularly during extended attack. We also note that during any year, thousands of wildland fires are suppressed without the benefit of any aviation support.

SAFETY

Safety is a core value for the Forest Service. Our firefighters do an impressive job under adverse conditions and they deserve our thanks. Firefighting is a high risk, high consequence activity so safety and training are essential for firefighter preparedness. Situational awareness is the centerpiece of firefighter safety and for managing the unexpected on wildfires. Formal classroom training, on-the-job training, drills, discussions, and reviews are part of an extensive training program for all involved in fire management. Firefighters must complete both coursework and multiple training assignments before they are certified for critical fireline positions.

In the fall of 2004, the USDA Office of Inspector General (OIG) completed a review of the Forest Service Firefighting Safety Program. The report noted the Forest Service has made significant improvements in the safety of firefighting operations and had excellent written firefighting safety policies and procedures. The report identified four areas in which the agency can strengthen efforts to promote firefighter safety. The four areas that the OIG identified were: (1) monitoring the agency's response to fire safety recommendations, (2) maintaining centralized records to support firefighting qualifications, (3) conducting administrative investigations on serious fire accidents, and (4) incorporating firefighting safety standards as critical elements in firefighter performance evaluations. Reviews such as the OIG report help us in our evaluations of firefighter safety.

Nationally, the Forest Service works with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and other interagency partners through the National Wildfire Coordinating Group to determine

areas of safety that need focus. These areas include fire complexity analysis, enhanced training of agency administrators involved in fire suppression, emphasis on fatigue awareness, and improved work/rest guidelines. After several serious vehicle accidents, guidelines for driving and rest periods have been strengthened and clarified for both our employees and our contractors. The new Incident Qualifications Certification System enhances our ability to track classroom training and on-the-job training of each federal firefighter and fire manager. With this system, fire managers and supervisors can better measure success and determine future training needs. We are also concentrating on leadership development for both firefighters and managers. We emphasize preparing leaders to be capable decision-makers in the complex and intense situations found in firefighting.

MANAGEMENT

The President's Healthy Forest Initiative has provided us with tools to reduce the risk of severe wildland fires and restore forest and rangeland health. In total, the Humboldt-Toyiabe National Forest will have completed nearly 7,000 acres of fuels treatments between 2001 and 2005. About 3,035 of those acres are located in the Wildland-Urban Interface. I expect the program to significantly increase over the next several years as we complete additional planning and collaboration.

Over the past two years, the Nevada State Forester, Bureau of Land Management, and the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest worked with Nevada Fire Safe Council and local communities to complete Community Wildfire Protection plans for 251 communities at risk in Nevada. These plans identify actions to protect communities and provide the opportunity to become involved in planning for hazardous fuels treatment on Federal lands.

This year, the Forest Service provided over $2.25 million in matching grants, where the federal and state each make available approximately equal funding, to the state of Nevada for fire, fuels, and forest health management. The Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest also assists volunteer rural fire departments with training, equipment and organization through the Volunteer Fire Assistance program.

Scientists are also involved in the firefighting effort. We land managers increasingly need scientifically sound solutions to firefighting as well as land management. We have always needed science-informed decision making, but the demand is increasing as we strive to address fuels problems and restore fire-adapted ecosystems. For example, program planning to identify high priority needs continues to be an important part of fuels management activities. LANDFIRE, a science based multi-partner ecosystem and fuel assessment mapping project, will improve our ability to choose high priority projects. We expect to begin using aspects of LANDFIRE in 2006. Generally, fire-adapted ecosystems do recover after a fire. Sometimes recovery can take many decades and land management objectives may indicate restoration efforts to speed recovery. Research and tools developed by scientists provide important methods of evaluating actions that are most effective for emergency stabilization, rehabilitation, and restoration.

As you can see, there are many facets of fire management. Many occupations are involved in firefighting – planners, scientists, hydrologists, biologists, finance managers, community

specialists as well as the men and women of our firefighting force. When fire season is over, our firefighters have collateral duties and put their many skills to good use – including planning, fuels management projects, range projects, and other non-fire duties. Conversely, many of our foresters, biologists, hydrologist and other professional, technical, and clerical employees have collateral fire duties when the need arises. Everyone contributes.

WHAT CITIZENS CAN DO

Lastly, I'd like to say a few words about actions citizens can take. In addition to the community wildfire protection plans, citizens can get assistance to protect their homes and communities through the FIREWISE program, which helps people who live or vacation areas with higher fire risks educate themselves about wildland fire protection. Homeowners can learn how to protect their homes with a survivable, cleared space and how to build their houses and landscape their yard with fire resistant materials. A consortium of wildland fire agencies sponsors the program; including the Forest Service, the Department of the Interior, the National Fire Protection Association, and the National Association of State Foresters. The information is available at the website: www.FIREWISE.org and from local agency offices.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this opportunity to discuss fire management. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.